

Solidarity against the odds: trade union activism in a hostile environment

Farheen Ahmed in conversation with Kirsten Forkert and David Featherstone

It is difficult to take on exploitative employers and a hostile environment for trade unionists as well as people of colour - and a sometimes exclusionary labour movement. But it is possible ...

Kirsten: Can you tell us a bit about your union work, how you became involved in trade union activism and perhaps a little bit about your organising work?

Farheen: At the moment, I'm organising in various areas; in terms of trade unions, I'm the current anti-racism officer for Birmingham Trades Union Council, and involved in the Legal Sector branch of United Voices of the World and in Unite the Union. I have also slowly been trying to get back to being involved with other campaign initiatives (migrant solidarity, climate justice, and education) and have in the past been involved in 'non-reformist' work around prisons with others in the trade union movement.

My start in organising was when I when I was a student. I was involved in

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various strains of student campaigning and organising efforts then, particularly around anti-racism and equalities issues more broadly. I was dragged into anti-racist organising at university by a few comrades of mine, who were invested in looking at race through a class lens. They were helpful in guiding me through some of the learning around that. That was really helpful for my politics and understanding of how issues impacted me as someone who presents (and is racialised) as a Muslim. I was introduced initially to the concept of intersectionality, and later moved from this framework towards understanding some of the complexities involved in maintaining relationships predicated on principles of solidarity and comradeship (as well as all the difficulties that this can entail).

Eventually, I got involved in various other things, primarily to do with the Labour Party to begin with. After university, I was employed as a sabbatical officer for a year. And that was a weird year - Student Union officers really don't get a warning beforehand about just how weird the role is going to be. I was in this strange '*in between*' phase, in charge of a charity, and having to deal with it as a trustee, while also having to advocate for students. It was hard to take all of that information in and work effectively, and it was during that sabbatical year, 2017-18, that the UCU [the University and College Union] went on strike.

So that's when I had my first interaction with a picket line that I had friends on. People talk a lot about how much you can learn from a picket line, and that was my experience - I was learning from people who were organising within their union for the strike, as well as students who were lending their support and solidarity in a number of ways. I did a little bit of organising around getting the student union to support the strike, because there was quite a lot of internal push-back. A dominant view among some students at the time - in an indication of their adoption of a neoliberal framing around education - was that the strikes were impacting on the service they had paid for. Essentially, academics and staff were seen to be depriving students of their tutors and lecturers. That was also some of the Student Union officers' perspectives and positions.

Thankfully, others took the opposite position: that education is a public good and those who work in it should be fairly treated and remunerated. That was one of my first interactions with militant trade union organising, because I was involved with a couple of rank-and-file people who were pretty strong and sound in their organising and coordination.

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Dave: I think student involvement, particularly during the 2018 dispute, really shifted the dynamics of what that strike was all about, and it's really interesting to hear you talk about that as a moment of politicisation as well - it made a massive difference that there was active student support. And I think it also challenged some of the limits of UCU as a union - which of course are many - particularly the tendency to frame things in quite narrow, sectional, ways - which I think is continuing, unfortunately.

Farheen: I also noticed that there was a difference between, let's say, graduate teachers and more junior lecturers, as against more senior lecturers. That was an interesting dichotomy that I saw unfold.

Kirsten: I became involved in UCU in 2010-11, while I was doing my PhD and working as a graduate teaching assistant. It was my first involvement in picket lines. This was against the backdrop of wider struggles in the student movement, and local anti-cuts groups as well. I was studying at Goldsmiths, which was quite a militant branch. What was inspiring was that they were also trying to push back against the limits of traditional trade union organising, using some of the imaginative tactics more conventionally associated with social movements.

I've worked in different jobs in the education sector, and my most recent experience is working somewhere where there has historically been a very weak union branch, and I'm really trying to turn it into something active again. I've been trying to foster the kind of spirit that I encountered in 2010 - and that has challenges. Trying to work in branches that aren't active, and in which there is a lot of resignation, defeatism and fatalism - trying to shift that mood - that takes a lot of building work.

Like Farheen, I don't think I look like the sort of person one immediately associates with trade union activism - that's a particular stereotype one must confront, which presents other issues.

Organising on the ground: bureaucracy versus activism

Farheen: In the 1980s and 1990s, religious institutions would often take the lead on anti-deportation campaigns, and sometimes attempt to bring in trade unions locally to help them. But it would be the rank and file of the unions who would support

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those campaigns and initiatives, not necessarily the trade union's senior bureaucracy. These conflicts often emerged, and they still do - I think there's a lot of work to be done to ensure the bureaucracy better serves the interests and needs of the rank and file. We need more of a dialogue between them. At the moment, it is sometimes the case that people at higher levels of bureaucracy don't hear or speak to, or even try to engage with, those who are on the ground, particularly those who are the most exploited workers.

I think that's one of the problems which I'm still grappling with. There's a big question about the efficacy of trade union organising if the rank and file and the most exploited workers can't access the leadership and therefore change the policy agenda of their union.

Dave: I'd be interested in hearing more about your experience of navigating those tensions in your own organising work, and how you think they can overcome those. What strategies do you think can be useful to bridge those divides and challenge entrenched bureaucracies?

Kirsten: Isn't this partly a question about elected representatives versus paid staff of the union? - and also a question about who gets elected to these sorts of executive positions in policy-making? Or is it to do with paid officials versus lay members?

Farheen: Those splits are of different kinds. There are elected members who are paid as elected staff and there are elected members who are unpaid. There are also paid officials who are not elected. There can be issues with all paid organisers - sometimes they are forces of their own making, and, as they're paid to do it, they have more time and energy to organise. But they can be somewhat detached from the actual workplace and the structural problems that exist there, and may not understand the material problems that exist in the workplace without closer interrogation of the workers' circumstances. And sometimes staff members will set what their priorities are without really engaging with the membership. And that can mean, for example, that expanding organising capacity can sometimes be given to certain members and certain workplaces over others. However, I'm more concerned about paid officials who are not elected. With elected officials there is usually a way to eventually hold them accountable in some form or another.

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The United Voices of the World (UVW) is a small union made up of a collection of various branches across different sectors of society. I'm in the Legal Sector branch ('Legal Sector Workers United' or 'LSWU'), because of my area of work. But other branches are made up of migrant cleaners, people working in design, in architecture, or as sex workers. It's a very broad base of workers. So a paid official often has to make a decision about directing energy and attention towards a specific sector and/or branch, without necessarily having been elected on a mandate to pursue that.

One concern is that there isn't always a feedback mechanism between paid organisers, paid elected officials and unpaid elected officials and members. In some instances in the UVW specifically, members don't necessarily always have a chance to feedback until an AGM, and that's usually the only opportunity to feedback. And so people have a sense of distance from the senior leadership and executive a lot of the time. And I think that makes it harder to set agendas about what you want your workplace to do versus what the union needs to achieve. Of course, it almost goes without saying that such difficulties can play out - albeit in different ways - in larger unions. But the failure to have better, more functional mechanisms in a smaller union like UVW can almost cause more disappointment.

Kirsten: I wonder if that's a holdover from a servicing model of trade unionism? If members are only able to feed in at an AGM, that's a pretty dire state of trade union democracy. The idea of paid organisers also seems to be connected to a servicing model - the idea that the branch itself doesn't develop the organising capacity and instead you've got to pay someone to do the job professionally. Paid organisers aren't really used within the UCU - or in most other unions in the UK - so I'm not really that familiar with that model. But I know it is used in the American context, and I think it has been brought into some British unions as well, though not many.

In bigger unions, you have people who are lay members, reps at local branch level, who participate in the national body, but you also have paid officials who work for the union at different geographical levels. This leads to another issue. The higher up you go in the trade union hierarchy, the less representative of the rank and file you tend to be. You tend to get people who've got time on their hands - people who perhaps are in positions in their jobs where they don't have a lot of commitments, or people who are maybe moving towards retirement, that sort of thing. The people with time on their hands tend to be political junkies who have tried to be involved

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in these sorts of things, but who aren't involved in the kinds of workplace struggles that people on the ground are. I think there are structural factors influencing how people get into these positions. But there are also cultural factors. It's assumed that you've got familiarity with certain kinds of histories of trade union activism, certain cultures, certain behaviours, certain attitudes - more so possibly at the top than at a local branch level.

Dave: I think some of the union structures have their place, for example debating and passing motions to support other campaigns and struggles, or as a way of participating in the union's regional and national decision-making processes. However, some processes are not always that legible and are not necessarily a good kind of mechanism for gaining a sense of people's broader experience within the workplace. And this can be compounded by the kinds of branch meetings which prioritise motions and procedural stuff, over a more nuanced and open discussion and can often be dominated by the same two or three individuals ...

Kirsten: The political junkies!

Farheen: This touches on an important point that often comes up at localised branch meetings. There will always be a couple of people who talk over others and sometimes this leads you to have a bitter experience in the organisation. One of the things that concerns me is that a lot of people who haven't been long in the trade union movement find these behaviours and unclear debates on motions odd and off-putting.

You're often not discussing issues like how to navigate workplace disputes or how to navigate and organise - new members are often fascinated with that stuff but they can't find where to have these conversations. Trade union organising and branch discussion should be something more than simply passing motions - after all there are material interests and circumstances that you can change and worker power to leverage. But instead of the time being spent on those aspects, you're often passing motions to affiliate to various organisations. Not that that is always negative: motions can be a good way to introduce and debate political issues. Branches can be a good space for wider political education. But if that's the only way that you're receiving education - through debating a motion - you're not necessarily going to know how to critically look at the issue or address any material issues that surround it.

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For example, we had a motion that came through one of our branches around Palestine and BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign]. It was a great motion that demanded that the union did something in solidarity with Palestine and joined the international campaign. However, the motion didn't directly mention any encouragement of, or address methods of nourishing, relationships with unions on the ground in Palestine, say, the Palestinian women's unions, or general unions which have been organising there for a long time. In many cases, relationships haven't been established between Palestinian unions and UK unions, despite a BDS motion having been passed through their branches - although I know some unions, like Unite, do send envoys of people to Palestine, where they meet people on the ground, which can be helpful to developing those international connections.

It's just that it's very disorienting if you're introduced into the union movement, and at the first meeting you go to you have to sit through five motions, a lot of them perhaps really contentious, and it can be difficult to keep up.

Dave: In some of my research I've been looking into the history of solidarity with Chile after the Pinochet coup in 1973. It is really interesting to see how that sense of solidarity was expressed, not just in motions, but in the different practical ways in which that was followed up in the 1970s, in all sorts of different ways - which often conflicted with the Labour government and figures like Jim Callaghan.

Kirsten: One issue with motions is that they tend toward the rhetorical, it's all about making the big speech, making the big statement, and having the big spat. And I can see why that can be useful. It's something for people to vote on and so on. However, this raises questions about whether they are the best sort of vehicle for union democracy. And could we imagine union democracy in another way? What if we didn't have motions? What if we had something else? What could we do instead? Could we have people's assemblies? Should we find some other kinds of structure to facilitate the greatest possible engagement and participation, particularly for those who aren't necessarily familiar with union practices? Is there something we can learn from more autonomous practices - from feminist practices for example?

Farheen: I think it's a good idea to try to start learning from feminist structures, particularly collective organisations. For example, the Combahee River collective, an organisation established on feminist and black radicalism, makes decisions in

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a far more collaborative manner than in trade union organising. Of course, there are sometimes occasions when leadership is warranted. However, my concern is more about how decisions to adopt various motions can often be used factionally. Factions aren't a bad thing. Of course not. I think that in every trade union there will be factions, political affiliations and so on. I can appreciate that. But the concern is that motions often replicate existing factions, and they don't necessarily allow for an explanation or exploration of positions. Nor do they often ask how else can we build, either within or beyond our membership, or what we have in common that we can move forward on. How can we make sure that our workplaces and workers in that workplace are fully educated on their rights and responsibilities in the ways of organising and coordinating within those workplaces?

As I said, UVW has quite a lot of cross-sector organising. So, it would be interesting for me to learn more about how the other sectors coordinate and organise, rather than just how lawyers organise. There are people in various parts of my workplace who aren't going to be part of the LSWU branch, despite working in the same workplace. For example, cleaners in a law firm are not necessarily going to go to the LSWU, they might be in a different branch or simply in the wider membership. So there are relationships that should be built within and outside my branch. It can be very difficult to have that kind of cross-union understanding of one another's work - let alone to talk about any broader work that we need to be collaborating on.

Dave: It's an interesting question. As Gargi Bhattacharyya and her co-authors remark in *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State*, campaigns around decolonising the university have been largely framed in elite terms. As they comment: 'The question of who would clean the "decolonised" university is rarely asked'.¹ Some of the discussions around decolonising universities - which are of course crucial - have had a very narrow conception of what kinds of university spaces are being envisioned. I think this opens key questions in terms of university action, moving forward.

Kirsten: When different unions are participating in a similar struggle, like now, when we've got all these similar strikes going on, it might open up some of those questions a little bit more, including on the importance of cross-sectoral organising and learning and dialogue. One of the things you mentioned earlier, Farheen, is the problem of a sectoral based approach. Do you want to say any more about that?

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Farheen: So, my experience of the legal sector is very specific. And my experience of the general world of work is very specific as well. I know that there are cleaners who used to work in the law firm that I worked at who were getting paid via an outsourced agency. Basically, a minimum wage, and they were paid for fewer hours than they would work. Whilst I was a paralegal, I was getting paid a fairly low salary, but there were people in the same workplace getting paid even less, and their struggles were being hidden away. So, for me, the cross-sector approach was important because people who work in law firms aren't just lawyers. They're also administrators, cleaners, and so on.

In the first year of the pandemic, all the administrative staff essentially got made redundant and their work was outsourced. We weren't told about any of this, or consulted about it. Because again, as with other arenas, there is an unsaid rule that you don't make trouble at a law firm. If you're wanting to progress, you just don't say too much.

And I still think about the administrative staff members who were just wholesale made redundant, and were not informed about ways to be retrained into roles, because the firm was more interested in saving money during a pandemic than allowing people to have their salaries and survive during it.

So, I think that experience sparked my interest and my need to ensure that there's more of a cross sectoral understanding, because at one point I was slightly higher up in the chain. So that meant that I had slightly more power to raise concerns and issues. But it didn't necessarily mean I had the power to change what happened, because we're never going to do it by ourselves, we've got to do it collectively, you've got to do things with an understanding of the workplace as it exists and try to coordinate efforts to change it.

Solidarity between non-migrant and migrant fellow workers

Kirsten: One of the ways that employers try to exploit people is hiring people with precarious immigration status. Perhaps we could talk a little bit about migrant justice, and the involvement of trade union activists in solidarity with workers with precarious immigration status - in making a challenge to the really frightening politics we're seeing coming from Braverman at the moment. Sadly, the trade union movement has a bit of a chequered history on this issue of solidarity. There have

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been people in the right wing of the trade union movement who've argued in favour of Brexit, or who have made comments about migrant workers threatening jobs. Could you say a little bit about your work in relation to migrant solidarity?

Farheen: We live in a country which has progressively, over the years, sought to exclude people.² The British empire established itself around all around the world - it stole, exploited and pillaged from millions around the world, but never anticipated or wanted anyone to come back to its centre, even though, ironically, the settler-colonialists talked all the time about how England was so great.

That's the overarching context of discussions around trade unionism. Amongst all of that pillaging and stealing, the occupations and the settler colonialism - amongst all of that - were people who were severely exploited. Continuing on from that in one iteration is this creation of a new class of migrant workers, many of whom work in the NHS, for example. The attitude is 'you can come and stay as long as you're working for US, as long as you meet these criteria to serve US and to serve the "British" people'. I think this sort of narrative was even drawn on by Keir Starmer recently - outrageous comments, just completely dog-whistle politics, and unacceptable for someone who's supposed to be challenging the Conservative Party on their views.

So that's the overarching context - this country has always sought to exclude as many people as possible from the Empire it established. And that's been progressive over the years, we've had successive pieces of restrictive legislation. Now there are reams of legal guidance and regulations around immigration and movement between borders of nation-states, as opposed to previously when you were able to come through and move within the empire with a little bit more fluidity.

But, taking into account this context, you can see how legislation around immigration and nationality is used to create clear divisions and dividing lines within the international working class. If you look at workers holistically, it's very diverse, right? The working class contains loads of opposing political perspectives. Part of the difficulty in navigating this is that it often means that you have to deal with very difficult political perspectives - ones that are what you'd call right-wing. You need to be able to bring your community with you, as you're trying to fight for everyone's freedom and liberation, and you are going to have to deal with those differing perspectives, especially in a society where this is the overarching legal

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framework - let alone in the context of what the mainstream press and education system often espouse.

So you're going to have to grapple with these political perspectives and these viewpoints. I think the problem is, though, that sometimes trade unions fall short of doing that critical work of political education. The critical work of acting as an opposing viewpoint in the mainstream discourse. For example, with Brexit, you did have some people in the trade unions talking about how they supported Brexit, because they didn't want the legal frameworks of the neoliberal trade bloc. I think those perspectives were important in trying to set out why you could be sceptical of the European Union, but not on a basis that states that freedom of movement is somehow a problem for 'British' workers. I am concerned by the fact that unions are supposed to be these critical voices, but they don't necessarily do the work of educating and sharing knowledge within the union. Once you join the trade union, instead of attending a meeting dominated by procedures, you should also be in a meeting that allows you to engage in these conversations.

And that could start the process of unlearning what the newspapers and the media, even the British education system, are saying. It's important for trade unions to act as a conduit for anti-colonial and anti-imperialist conversation. I think this is an important part of trade union work, and it isn't necessarily being reflected in some current trade union organising. That's not to say it isn't being done in some places. There are workers who are doing an incredibly good job of leading on these kind of conversations, trying to be part of these pro-migrant coalitions, trying to bring the conversation closer towards supporting migrant workers as opposed to distinguishing such workers from 'their' movement. I think that is happening, but it isn't happening in as widespread a way as I think it should be. It needs to happen if we are going to try to change the narrative around migration and the UK.

Kirsten: It strikes me that when you see trade unionists saying anti-immigrant things, they are actually talking about some of their own members. I'll use the example of Gerald Coyne when he ran for the leadership of Unite. He actually made comments about migrant workers being a threat. And I was thinking, don't you know you could be talking about your own membership? You know that those are your members you are saying are a threat, right? I also wonder if this is because there's a tendency that suggests unions are there for the so-called bread and

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butter issues, which only are relevant to those with certain (for example British) citizenship. Something like the rights of migrant workers is seen as an abstract equality or internationalist issue, and as not connected to bread and butter industrial issues - which sometimes are seen in a quite narrow sense.

Dave: I've got a couple of thoughts on this. One relates to the kind of research that I'm doing at the moment. I came across some interesting material recently regarding the aftermath of the 1971 Immigration Act. In the mid-1970s some Indian and Pakistani seafarers who were coming into Glasgow suddenly found that they couldn't work there anymore, and a number were incarcerated in Barlinnie prison. But what was interesting is that the Trades Council, the Scottish immigrant Labour Council, and also the National Union of Seamen, which in general had a pretty terrible record on race, were involved in solidarity work with the seafarers and in opposing their imprisonment. There is a huge amount of negative history around race in the British labour movement, which rightly needs to be foregrounded. But there are also really interesting histories of solidarity that I think are important. Suki Sangha, who's a Scottish trade unionist, argues, for example, that we just don't hear stories about black and minority ethnic trade unionists.

Farheen: I want to reiterate the point about solidarity not being talked about enough. When I talk about political education, I think one of the problems I have is that there's often this sparring off - migrant workers being pitted against people who are based here, or have citizenship here - rather than the conversation that should be happening: about how some of the best and brightest acts of solidarity, and pickets in solidarity, have happened on the basis that these workers weren't divided on immigration grounds. The law itself has been utilised to split them apart, but why would you use that division when there are these incredibly cool stories? For example, the story of Birmingham's anti-deportation campaigns around Muhammad Idrish.

There are many incredible immigrants who are engaged in campaigns against their own deportation and that of those around them. But in the case of Muhammad Idrish specifically, a trade union was involved - his trade union. And they became invested in making sure he didn't get deported. And then they got involved in campaigns around limiting and reducing the kind of complex immigration system that emerged in the 1980s. As you say, I think those kinds of acts of solidarity are

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the things that we should be focusing on - though we should also be critical about the fact that it has taken so long for some trade unions to join in. Sure, we should be critical. But we have to also remember that someone, somewhere in that trade union, did the work of convincing their bureaucracy to change their views. There is a lot to learn from that process and from that work.

Dave: Going back to some of the negative stuff. Unfortunately, Starmer is also presently speaking to very regressive imaginations of history. This raises a huge set of challenges at the moment. On the one hand it feels like we've got some really interesting, obviously kind of complicated, organising going on and getting some traction. And then you've got a Labour Party that's just unspeakable in terms of the way it's being run and in terms of its dominant narratives, which I think is also based on a very misguided reading of the political situation.

Kirsten: There are two things happening with Starmer. He's seeing the voters they need to win, specifically the Tory voters in the marginal seats they need to win. And he's doing the classic Blairite triangulation thing, where only the views of those in marginal seats matter, and there is a sense that others don't count, or worse, that they can be thrown under the bus. However, I think there's something else going on, which is even worse: there seems to be a perception that [Conservative] voters with socially conservative views are somehow representative of the authentic working class. Which means that others - young people, people of colour, people living in cities, etc - are seen to be not electorally important because of living in safe Labour constituencies. There is a nostalgic, regressive idea of the working class that's also motivating this approach, but there's also a failure to recognise the working class in all its diversity. The continual stories about racism, and Islamophobia in particular, within the Labour Party, suggest that there's still all kinds of issues that they've not dealt with. Especially when you think of the treatment of people like Zarah Sultana [MP for Coventry South].

Some unions are affiliated to the Labour Party and others are not. Unite is affiliated and UVW isn't, for example. I'm not sure if it's worth always thinking about the Labour Party in relation to the trade union movement, particularly given these unresolved issues around race.

Farheen: I was questioning whether we should be spending so much time on the

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Labour Party in our conversation about trade unionism, because I've had a lot of conversations with people who really questioned how much energy the unions put into the Labour Party - and how much focus they put on it - during the party's brief hiatus from being terrible on all things work-related. There was a brief window of time within the party which did allow for quite a lot of people that I know to then get fully engaged in trade union organising - trying to rebuild this broader working-class movement that the Labour Party had forgotten about. The main reason the Labour Party was established was to represent the trade union movement and working class in parliament. I think it has sufficiently moved away from that movement over the years. Its continued issues with racism and discrimination more broadly, its failures to recognise why equality is so important for a political party that's supposed to represent the trade union movement - there has been a clear failure to take on those things.

But having said all that, there is an internal conflict going on which Starmer represents most starkly. He is someone who is constantly over-analysing with the focus groups that he hand-selects. You'll often hear talk about a narrow conception of who working people are, not necessarily about a working class as a whole. I think that's a very specific use of phrasing. You don't talk about class dynamics. I don't know how much the Labour Party can be recovered. It likely will never go back to its original roots. I think the party has become something different - it is an electoral force that's constantly hacking to make sure that they win whatever they think they can win from an electoral base that is defined by those who happen to be in charge.

There's some literature which has come out about Starmer: I work in the legal profession so I have a little knowledge from people who worked alongside and opposite him. And that tells me all that I need to know about how, and whether or not, he'll ever listen to any person who wants to advocate for the working class or working people of this country. I certainly doubt it internationally.

That is not to say that we shouldn't engage with the Labour Party. Unfortunately, it's one of the few things that exists, as you know, so we shouldn't take our foot off the pedal and never engage with anything. I think we need to have a happy medium, a scale between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activity, so that we're able to kind of come back in if it ever is useful.

The one option we have is to be advocating outside of parliament. We need to build a strong coalition of forces outside of parliament to advocate for better

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treatment of people who are migrating to this country for whatever reason - whether it's because they want to have a better life, or whether they're coming here for safety or refuge. We need to be able to support people who are moving through borders to come to the UK, because that is a huge responsibility on us.

I think we are seeing too many people being exploited, being harmed and being traumatised by the experiences they have of getting to this country. Why are we in a country that has these harsh borders? We need to have that question actively discussed, and borders advocated against, in our trade unions. I would love to have some more conversations about that because I don't really know how we can enforce it. We are existing in this place where Braverman is Home Secretary, after the previous Priti Patel. I feel like it can only go downhill from here. So it's going to be even more important to have the conversations around collective rights. At this moment the Human Rights Act is protecting some people, allowing them to come to this country, to be with their chosen loved ones and to not be detained. There's going to be a huge struggle, if the Act is targeted, and it seems that the Tories are coming for it. And I think there are a lot of things that that might cause even more damage. So we need to have an opposition that can talk about these things at that stage - whilst the rest of us will be advocating for better treatment of people who are migrating to this country.

A renewal of trade union activism?

Kirsten: We are in a significant moment. I've read recently that there are actually now more days lost to strike action than in the late 1980s or 1990s. What possibilities does this upsurge in strike action present to the trade union movement? What are the opportunities and challenges in the moment ahead? I was also thinking about the dominant media representations of the trade union movement, which play into the stereotypes we touched on in the beginning of the discussion.

Dave: From my perspective, I think there's perhaps two things that are that are important. Firstly, that anti-union laws haven't stopped people going on strike. I think that's a massive thing, obviously, and it means that they're trying to bring in even more repressive laws. That's clearly a scary prospect, along with the broader authoritarianism of the current Tory government, and the other people you mentioned, who are weighing in.

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Secondly - and this relates to the point about representation - I think there's been a real pushback against some of the old stereotypes of trade union organising. If you think of the way Mick Lynch and Sharon Graham have come into the media sphere, and not been afraid to challenge negative representations - exposing media banality without being unnecessarily aggressive, and being quite clever in the way that they've clearly done that. And I think they are opening an important political space through doing so. Both the Labour leadership and the Tories are stuck in a mould where they're expecting people to have a knee-jerk opposition to trade union leaders and strikes - which is based on a problematic reading of common sense. I think things have shifted. I also think that both parties have underestimated how pissed off, and struggling, huge amounts of people are.

Kirsten: I agree with what you said, Dave, about the fact that anti-trade union laws haven't stopped us from being able to get over the 50 per cent threshold [legally required for industrial action]. But what's also important about this moment is that people aren't sitting down and taking it. You've got employers offering below-inflation pay offers and, instead of accepting this, people are having the confidence to organise. When I talked about trying to rebuild an inactive union branch - there used to quite often be a mood of defeatism and resignation and fatalism. 'Oh, well, what can you do?' We'll just whisper in the corridors or moan in the pub, but we're not going to do anything. What's great to see is that people now seem to have the confidence to actually do something, and they aren't willing to settle for the 2 per cent or whatever a lot of these employers are offering.

But the other issue is that the situation has become so urgent, because of inflation. You can't live on a 2 per cent pay increase. In terms of media representation, I think what's been really satisfying about Mick Lynch and Sharon Graham and some of the others is that they've confronted the politicians and the pundits, exposing all the lazy journalistic tactics, and it's opening up a real space to challenge the media's anti-union consensus, where it's all about commuters who have been disrupted, or customers who have been inconvenienced - and we don't tend to think of the commuters and the customers and the workers as being the same people. I think it's a really crucial moment.

Farheen: I agree with what both of you have said. I think it's it is quite a critical moment. If the RMT win their strike, it would be a huge recruitment incentive

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- for people to re-join, and reinvigorate, the trade union movement, which, for a little while, has been somewhat complacent. There have been these dominant unions that haven't necessarily engaged with new workplaces, new workplace structures, new ways that people work - which isn't necessarily in the same place. For example, working from home has happened in a lot of law firms. And it's been quite interesting trying to figure out how to get people to talk to one another about their terrible working conditions and then organise to change them. So if we can overcome some of that, and then learn from workers who are newer to it, trying to navigate some of those things - if there are more victories, more successes - that will be a huge boost for the trade union movement.

But, as you also say, there are currently pieces of anti-trade union legislation that already exist. And legislation facilitating scabbing [through allowing employers to hire replacement workers for strikers] is going to come into effect at some point in the near future. It was an outrageous idea even in theory, and the fact that it's actually in progress now has caused a lot of concern. A lot of the bigger unions who are engaged in strikes, such as on the trains, they actually have been able to shut down the country, which is a really important tool for them to get the outcomes that they need for their members. But that's going to be a problem if bosses are able to replace those workers. So we need to make sure that we keep our eyes on expanding the trade union movement whilst also recognising that there are these laws in place that will restrict our ability to organise - though they will not necessarily stop us being effective. I think there are ways still to organise, and it is important to remember that there is a role in trying to challenge those restrictions where you can. Mick Lynch talks about the fact that if he does anything against the law, assets will get taken away from the union, or sequestered. That's a limitation that you have in trade union organising - you have these draconian laws you have to abide by - for example, you can't necessarily support wildcat strikes.

Organising in the toughest places

It's even more difficult to support workers taking such strike action when they're not recognised in their workplace. How would you then protect those workers? - because the law prevents you. That's another important issue from the UVW perspective, because there are often workers who aren't in a workplace with a recognised union - there's maybe fifty workers or twenty-five workers in a workplace

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trying to coordinate with one another. They're not necessarily able to overcome the obstacles. So how can we look at these new workplace structures and find ways to allow people to join the trade union movement whilst also reassuring them that they're going to be able to take action? That gap - or lack - still exists. But this is maybe the moment to try and resolve it, try and take steps to make sure that those workers are reassured and they do feel that they can use collective bargaining to their own ends.

I also want to say one thing about the idea of immigration policy restricting who has the ability and the right to work. It's interesting that there have been initiatives to try and coordinate workers in detention centres, for example, who have precarious immigration status - because they're unable to unionise. But they are paid outrageously low amounts - say a pound an hour - to maintain their own conditions. People in prison also get paid a pittance to maintain their own conditions. So, there is another question about who has the right to work, who has the right to fair working conditions, even issues like the minimum wage - there is an important conversation to be had about those things, particularly when it comes to migrant workers and people who are accessing work in more precarious ways.

Kirsten: Absolutely. I became a British citizen in 2020, and I was on a bunch of different visas beforehand. And I had to watch visa restrictions and Home Office rules like a hawk. For example, when I was a student I had restrictions on how many hours I was allowed to work. I was working part time, but trying to make sure I didn't go beyond the restricted hours. And the truth of the hostile environment was that all of these rules got tighter and tighter and tighter. Farheen, I was wondering if you wanted to mention the issue that came up with the last Birmingham Trades Council meeting in terms of the students from India and how they're being exploited. What's your sense of that whole situation?

Farheen: This is a case concerning migrant student workers, student workers who have, as you say, a restriction on how many hours they're permitted to work per week, and the types of work that they can take on. These students had come over to study in the UK, and they needed to find work in order to supplement and support their studying, and also to send money back home, to their families. And it appears to be the case that the company that they are working for determined that they would pay them for only a limited number of hours - for those that they're permitted

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on their student visas - but would require them to work much longer hours. When any of the students started to complain about the fact that they were being made to work additional unpaid hours, certain members of the senior management went round to their houses to beat them up and even threaten their families back in back home in India. It is a particularly exploitative and violent workplace, and it's one where you can't really challenge anything. You're terrified about your own safety. Despite that fear, however, the workers have banded together. And now we're working alongside the Indian Workers Association (IWA) in Birmingham, to try to advocate for their jobs and for the money that they are owed. It's interesting to see how the IWA has organised around it - the first thing they've done is get legal advice, because they are concerned for the immigration status of those workers. It's a complicated situation but having the IWA's backing has assisted in trying to address some of these complexities, given their existing base in the city.

Kirsten: These kinds of situations are often out of sight, out of mind for the mainstream media. And this really underlines what we've been discussing - the importance of the trade union movement going into areas like this, where unions aren't recognised, workers aren't organised, and where a lot of exploitation happens, because people are precarious and scared. That is crucial and meaningful work that needs to be done. Hopefully, with the kind of upsurge we're seeing, we'll be able to make some gains that will inspire us to expand the trade union movement in these directions.

Farheen Ahmed is a trade union activist involved in the Legal Sector branch of United Voices of the World and in Unite the Union, and is anti-racism officer for Birmingham Trades Union Council.

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Notes

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